



Thoroughness in Medical Education

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Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Governing Body, Ladies and Gentlemen:

AT the beginning of each academical year, it may be in order to propitiate the divers deities which preside over the various branches to which our studies are to be directed, and it is the custom of the faculty to offer up in public a human sacrifice. But lest in a few years the supply of victims should run short if the older methods were carried out, the aforesaid faculty have devised a way out of the difficulty, which, in my opinion just at present at any rate, renders their procedure hardly less cold-blooded and barbarous, by ordering that the victim should not be put to death, but should stand up before this assembly and make an address. You will remember that Sam Weller praised the impartial justice of a country magistrate because he "committed himself quite as often as he committed a prisoner;" and I must say that the faculty show a certain amount of fairness in allowing the victim to victimize the audience. Our sufferings therefore, ladies and gentlemen, being mutual, we will proceed to terminate them as speedily as possible.

The remarks which I shall make today will deal with no new subject and with no new discovery. We will, at any rate, for a short time turn away from the consideration of antitoxin and immunity, and from the various new disorders which have been invented by clinicians since last year. But the subject of medical education, although well worn, is still the burning question of the day, and wherever medical men meet nowadays the question invariably comes up for discussion sooner or later. And I think we have much cause for congratulation that the medical profession as a body

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and as individuals have treated the question in no self-seeking spirit, but have evinced a sincere desire to further any reforms which may send out, over the country, physicians better equipped than they were themselves when they graduated. All honor must be rendered to the older members of our fraternity, who, not content with doing everything in their power to further the progress of preventive medicine and thereby take away to no slight extent their own livelihood, seem to be anxious to put into the field as their competitors men who have had advantages which they have never tasted. Yet like Moses viewing from Nebo the promised land into which he might not himself enter, these men grudge not that others should pass forward and enjoy what forever is shut to them.

I hope, therefore, I may be pardoned if I take up a few minutes of your time today with the consideration of "thoroughness in medical education."

But in treating of this as well as of any other important subject, the inevitable question, "*Cui Bono?*" comes up and I think it is worth while to go into this in detail. What classes of men, therefore, are especially interested in the question of thoroughness in medical education? I would answer three: (1) the public-at-large; (2) the faculties of the different medical schools and (3) the students of medicine themselves.

At first sight it may appear rather a difficult matter to believe that the public at large really desires to have well-trained physicians. Any one who has practiced medicine for any length of time knows that it is not the well-trained physician who always makes the greatest success in life. Too often the charlatan or the half-educated and not over-scrupulous doctor not only gets the lion's share of the emoluments of the profession in the shape of dollars and cents and of reputation, but also earns (if the word can be permitted in this connection), the gratitude of the patients who have turned from the honest and competent man, who has had the misfortune to let them know that he is not omnipotent, to the man who intuitively and without training "knows it all." The *argumentum ad hominem* always has at least a plausible ring to it. How often will a man tell you that he does not care where a physician was educated or in what school, or whether he can give a disease a learned name or not, provided only that he can cure his patients! This does, I must confess, sound well, but unfortunately, there comes at the end the "provided that." We all acknowledge that the cure of the patient is the end and aim of all our striving, but how shall we work in the dark? An ignorant man may indeed make one or several lucky hits, or indeed kind

nature may be stronger than his ill-directed methods, but it is an inevitable truth that "if we seek first to learn the structure of the body and the physiologic workings of the different organs, and next the changes produced by morbid processes, so that we can feel sure of what is going on in any given case, or in other words make a correct diagnosis, then ultimately, if not the cure, at least the proper treatment of the disease will be added unto us."

Let me put before you a homely parable, but one which I think has its application. Although, for many years I have carried a watch, I am afraid that my comprehension of its mechanism is practically *nil*. In former days I supposed that all people who called themselves watchmakers knew all about the subject, and whenever my watch got out of order I took it into the most convenient shop, and entrusted it to just anybody. Now I do not deny that sometimes the practical results were good, but after a great deal of experience (I mean the experience by which one profits, or in other words, the experience which is bought), I have come to the conclusion that it pays me better to take the trouble to find a man who understands his business before entrusting him with delicate machinery. I do not say for a moment that the work always satisfies me and in every case I get exactly what I want, but I am sure that in this way I average a better result.

The ordinary man starts in by thinking that any man who calls himself a physician knows all about medicine. This endures for a longer or shorter time, after which he gets to think that no doctor knows anything anyway. Still when he gets very sick again he sends for a doctor, and finally perhaps, reaches the conclusion that a good doctor knows something, but not everything.

It would be far better, if we as physicians dealt a little more gently with the shortcomings of the well-meaning but gullible public, and applied ourselves to the building of habitations not made with glass, but of some material which would stand better the stones which are cast at us.

I have always thought that one of my old teachers who is one of our celebrated therapeutists, stated the question very plainly, and not only told us the cause, but also (as we might indeed have expected) suggested a remedy for this grave pathologic condition. Professor H. C. Wood, in an address delivered before the medical students of the University of Yale in 1889, impressed upon them that all the success which has attended modern fads, the different "pathies" and "isms" in this country was mainly due to the fact, that the medical profession had so often when tried in the balance

been found wanting, or in other words was due to defective medical education. For the treatment, he says: "Let the medical practitioner be *homeopath*, *allopath* or no *path* at all,—only see to it that he is an educated man."

Anyone who can read correctly the signs of the times must be convinced that a revolution in public sentiment is surely though slowly coming about. The society-doctor is still sought after for his social qualities, but less and less for his medical advice. "The whole of the people cannot be fooled all the time." The public are beginning to demand that a man to whom they entrust heavy responsibilities, should at least give them some guarantee that he has learned his business, and only in rare cases will the man who neglects to furnish this guarantee stay permanently in the front rank.

One word here as to the use of legislation, with regard to this subject. Theoretically I favor all legislation which is beneficial to that portion of the public who are unable to take care of themselves. But it has often been said, and experience has often proved the allegation, that men cannot be legislated into being moral; and I do not believe that until the standard of the whole medical profession has been raised, and that time has been given to the public to appreciate the change, that legislation will do much for us. Laws must accompany or follow public sentiment; they can never lead it very far.

And now we come to the second group of men concerned, *viz.*: the faculties of the various medical colleges. The burning question with them of late years has been, to put it down in black and white, "Shall we teach medicine, or shall we carry on, on strictly business principles a manufactory of doctors?" I shall not now dwell upon the past history of medicine in this country. At a time when the mass of people could not read, it was to be expected that professional men would not reach a very high standard. But we live in a time when it is a rarity to find a child of twelve who cannot read, when our artisans and merchants are highly educated, when indeed some of our professional base-ball players are college-men, and are we going to offer to the medical student the same advantages which his grandfather had?

Upon the faculties of medical colleges is laid a great responsibility. It is still possible for a body of self-seeking men to arrange a specious announcement in which bacteriology, and all the other modern *ologies*, figure; it is possible for them to buy microscopes and equip laboratories and yet fail

to teach medicine. The true physician must always be capable of self-sacrifice, and every member of a medical faculty who has failed to learn this lesson and who fails to enter upon his work of teaching in this spirit is unworthy of his position. Each one must have the same spirit with which St. Paul was imbued in the carrying on of his missionary work; for we are missionaries, in another field it is true, and "woe be unto us if we teach not medicine."

It would be out of place for me in my present position to say anything in praise of the medical faculty of the Western Reserve University. But I think I am at liberty to speak of them as they appeared to me rather over a year ago; and I trust that they have not degenerated very much since. Of him, who was at that time Dean of the Faculty, whom I was privileged to know for only too short a time, I wish here to say only one thing. I felt sure that such a man could not live in a false atmosphere and was convinced that in becoming a member of a faculty over which he presided, I should be enrolled among a body of men whose standards of medical education were high, and who had a true appreciation of their own responsibilities.

Permit me, Mr. President and members of the Board of Trustees of the Western Reserve University, to congratulate you upon the spirit which permeates the whole course of teaching here. I am not sure that from a worldly point of view you have done a wise thing. You have materially increased your outlay without any expectation that the fees which you will receive from your students will at all correspond to the amount of money which has been spent.

Permit me, Mr. Dean and members of the Medical Faculty, to congratulate you upon the fact that we belong to a great university, and that our medical school is imbued with the university and not with the purely commercial spirit. I may also congratulate you upon the fact that in helping to bring about the recent changes you have largely increased your own work, but I cannot promise that you will receive any greater compensation than the satisfaction that "you have done that which it was your duty to do."

There still remains one other class of men to whom I wish to say a few words, *viz.*: the students who have put themselves under our charge, in order to be equipped for their life's work. Presupposing that none of you intend to enter the profession of medicine in the spirit in which the descendants of Eli entered the priesthood "that you may eat a morsel of bread," I can promise you great things which are only to be attained by a thorough

preparation for your profession. To put the temporal advantages first, as I have said before, the time has come when the public in general requires that a man should understand the work which he undertakes, and no ignorant physician can hope for any permanent success. The profession which you have chosen is full of responsibilities and anxieties. You cannot avoid many hours of anxious thought and worry when you come to deal with sick people, but of all torments, I believe nothing is equal to that of the man who has undertaken to do something of which he is absolutely ignorant. Human lives, and what is hardly less important, the happiness of human beings, is entrusted to your charge, and skilled as you may be, you will often be in despair at your helplessness to aid those who call upon you for assistance. But at least you can learn the limits, as well as the extent of your power, and with a thorough understanding of natural and morbid processes your anxieties will be at least minimized.

And now a word as to the method of learning while you are here, for, of course, you understand that a good physician never ceases to learn as long as he lives.

First, I would say, start at the beginning. Suppose that a patient were introduced into the room now, I have no doubt that the first thought of many of you, more particularly those of the first year, would be, "what medicine ought we to give him?" I do not blame you; you have come here to learn how to treat sick people, and you are anxious to begin at once to relieve suffering. Yes, but remember that good old Latin proverb, *festina lente*, "Hurry slowly," and another also which is like unto it which refers to "putting the vehicle before the quadruped," and take my advice, "Begin at the beginning." The dictum of Socrates, "I am wise because I know that I know nothing," if taken and applied in the strictest and most literal sense of the words, would certainly be the confession of a most pronounced pessimist. And yet Socrates himself, alive as he was to the prevailing ignorance and depravity in the world, did not by any means despair of the future of mankind; for had he regarded it as a hopeless task he certainly would not have devoted his whole life to teaching and endeavoring to raise the standard of human knowledge and morality. But reading between the lines we know that the precept inculcated by this dictum is rather that an education in any subject whatever, to be of any use must begin at the beginning and must be thorough.

I referred above to my not very happy experience with watches and their disorders, and said I had come to the conclusion to employ in future only a competent watchmaker. Unfortunately, at present it is possible for a man by dint of hard work to arrive at a much more accurate knowledge about the inward mechanism of a watch than of that belonging to the human organism. Still we have methods of learning a good deal about its workings, and I would say: "Do not grudge the time spent upon anatomy, physiology, pathology and clinical diagnosis." Remember that without these you can only rear a house built upon sand. After you leave here you will see plenty of patients, but unless you have learned while here to distinguish between the abnormal and the normal, you know what to look for and how to look for it, you can never hope to accomplish very much—except, perhaps, harm. Study methods, learn to observe now and you will be in a position to add to your information every day after you leave us. But few of you, perhaps, will have the time or opportunity to do much laboratory work when you get into active practice. Put the proper value then on your laboratory work now. Thoroughly master the use of the microscope and wherever you are you will be able to better follow the progress that is being made.

In many branches already it is possible for a man who has once learned the proper methods to do a good deal in bacteriology without necessarily having a laboratory at his disposal, and you may often find yourselves in places where it is impossible to find men to make bacteriological examinations for you. As time goes on I believe many simplifications of what are now somewhat complicated procedures will be discovered, and if you only have the groundwork you will be able to take advantage of them.

We do not profess to teach you in a three- or four-years' course all about medicine. Some of the time, perhaps, will be taken up in telling you what we do not know ourselves about the art of healing, but what we do aim at is that while teaching you as much about medicine as possible, we may *before all* put you in a position to continue your studies to the best advantage after you have left us.

